PHILOSOPHICAL NATIONALITY AND NATIONALISM

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From *The Philosopher*, vol. 107, no. 4
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NOTE: Originally a talk before the Philosophical Society of England, on the topic of "French Philosophy". It was revised over the course of the strange and long drawn out aftermath of the referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union, and that is reflected in the way in which it unfolds.

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Philosophy, from Descartes onwards, if not earlier, is for the most part written in a particular national language: French, German, English, Italian; yet it has always aspired to say something universally, absolutely true. But can a *universal* truth be expressed in a *particular* language? According to a classic, Platonic vision of philosophy, the universal (the abstract idea) and the particular (the concrete sensuous thing) are separated by a gulf. And as Alain Badiou, a French philosopher who is also an avowed Platonist, puts it, this seems to risk contaminating and distorting the Truth with the contingent features of our particular "situation".

PHILOSOPHY IS CONFRONTED WITH A CERTAIN PARADOX: IT NEEDS TO MAKE STATEMENTS THAT ARE TRUE EVERYWHERE, FOR EVERYONE, FOR ALL TIME, YET ALMOST AS INEVITABLY, IT MUST SPEAK IN A WAY THAT IS PECULIARLY LOCAL

To achieve philosophy's universal ends, are we in fact forced to relinquish as far as possible our more or less "natural" language together with its particularities, and approach a purely artificial or "technical" language – a set of symbols, like mathematics or formal logic (our "P"s and "Q"s)?

Philosophy, then, is confronted with a certain paradox: it needs to make statements that are true everywhere, for everyone, and for all time, and yet almost as

inevitably, it must speak in a way that is peculiarly local. There is perhaps no other discourse which aspires to the same conjunction of universality and particularity, from the extremes of literature and poetry, to logic, mathematics, and mathematicised science. Between the poetic and the mathematical stands philosophy.

Let us consider the simple phrase "French philosophy": this syntagm gathers up within itself both particularity (French) and universality (Philosophy), and thus the very idea of a "national philosophy" presents us with a problem: how can these two belong together in one entity? How can modern philosophy *itself* be possible? More generally, our question is: how can philosophy achieve the aim that it sets for itself: to speak the truth? – A truth that would be true always and everywhere, even for those who cannot understand the language that I speak, and who remain unacquainted with the particularities of my situation.

This rather abstract philosophical questioning will in the end help us to make sense of one of our many current political predicaments: the apparent opposition between nationalism and cosmopolitanism that was so vividly posed as such in the relatively recent and still undecided referendum in the United Kingdom.

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In response to the question, "[d]oesn't the particularity of a language make my supposedly universal discourse less universal than it aspires to be?", Badiou considers one possible and influential answer: "[T]here are even a few philosophers who were tempted to say: 'Yes, but certain languages have universal significance'. Some suggested German while others – often the same ones – suggested Greek". Badiou is here thinking of the German philosophers, Martin Heidegger and G.W.F. Hegel, the latter of whom wrote: "Luther made the Bible speak German [...]. I may say of my endeavour that I wish to teach philosophy to speak German".

IF THOUGHT IS TO ENCOMPASS THE UNITY OF OPPOSITES, SO MUST THE LANGUAGE WHICH ENCOMPASSES THOUGHT

Hegel has in mind the fact that German seems particularly blessed by words that he describes as inherently "speculative", which means that they are endowed with two opposed meanings, such as, most famously, the word that names the very procedure of his own "dialectical" method of thought, which aims at reconciling or surpassing pairs of terms that philosophy has traditionally treated as opposites (such as "universal" and "particular" for instance): the word is *Aufhebung* ("sublation") which means *both* to cancel or negate *and* to maintain or preserve.

For Hegel, the task of thinking is precisely to demonstrate how two apparently mutually exclusive positions may in fact be viewed from another higher standpoint as two sides of the same coin. "Speculation" derives from the Latin word for mirror, *speculum*, and is capable of demonstrating that the two opposites which it encompasses are not two disparate things, but a single entity and its own inverse, as yet unrecognised, mirror image. If thought is to encompass the unity of opposites, so must the language which encompasses thought, and German *in particular* is suited to the *universal* rationality of thought precisely because, by happy chance, it contains a number of such delightfully speculative terms.

As Jacques Derrida has pointed out, even if one resists saying that *one* language is essentially more philosophical or more universal than the others, one can, in the other direction, suggest that certain languages are inherently *non*-philosophical or *less* philosophical than others. Indeed, there is a tendency on the part of those philosophers lucky enough to have been born speaking German to suggest that all of the Latinate languages are inherently unphilosophical. And the same could be said – and has been – of the English language.

Alain Badiou does not accept this singling out of languages. His own preference is, in some contexts at least, for a language that would be absolutely universal, and that

is to say: mathematics. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz had much earlier on suggested a symbolic language which he named the "Universal Characteristic" – a set of "characters" of the greatest intelligibility and hence the greatest imaginable susceptibility to translation. To be more precise, for Badiou at least, such a symbolic language can teach philosophy what it might mean to say something that is universally true *despite* the fact that every philosopher is in some way compelled to speak from out of a very particular situation.

This would leave us with at least two options when it comes to speaking philosophically, which means to inscribe a universal truth within a particular language:

1) affirm that a particular language is capable of capturing the universal
2) jettison particularity as much as possible and adopt a *lingua franca* for philosophy.

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Up to now, we have let it seem as if the necessity for philosophy to speak a particular language – and that means many different languages – were an inconvenience, even a serious hindrance to be overcome as philosophy attempts to be what it is.

Jacques Derrida sees things in a different light: he attempts to show that this multiplicity is in fact a necessary part of philosophy, and may even be numbered among its very conditions of possibility. This would mean that philosophy cannot but speak a certain national natural language, and should not attempt to flee the particularities of its situation, but should embrace them.

ANY TOTALITY IS FORMED ONLY BY MEANS OF AN EXCLUSION OF SOMETHING THAT BELONGS TO IT, WHICH RENDERS THAT TOTALITY INCOMPLETE, AND THUS BINDS IT TO SOMETHING THAT IS NOW OUTSIDE OF IT

The question of a national philosophy, or as Derrida is perhaps more prone to say, a "philosophical *idiom*", provides us with a prime example of how Derrida's "deconstruction" functions, and so we might take this as an opportunity to learn something of this notion: it takes a structure (like the discourse of philosophy, or a philosophical "system") and demonstrates that a certain *element* of that structure makes the structure both possible and *im*possible at the same time. The logical or ontological insight which follows from this is the idea that any totality is formed *only* by means of an exclusion of something that belongs to it, which renders that totality *in*complete, and thus binds it to something that is now outside of it (having been excluded). It is thus part of the logic of identity as such that each and every individual hangs on something other than itself.

It is important in this context to understand the difference between what philosophy thinks and says about itself, and what is really the case (or what is the case from another point of view): Derrida's "deconstruction" frequently demonstrates this discrepancy *to* philosophy from a vantage point that is necessarily somewhat marginal with respect to it. Derrida explains the situation, as so often, in terms of the difference between the necessary and the contingent or accidental: philosophy *tells itself* that it is "essentially universal and cosmopolitan, that national, social, idiomatic difference in general should befall it only as a provisional and non-essential accident that could be overcome". Ideally, the Tower of Babel would have reached its goal without God's intervention or never have been built in the first place, for then the multiplicity and confusion of tongues would never have irrupted. It is purely contingent that it did.

So philosophy tells itself. But this contingency is precisely what Derrida will dispute, from another perspective, somewhat removed from philosophy as it has thus far unfolded for the most part. He suggests, on the contrary, that the multiplicity of languages is *necessarily* a part of philosophy.

Derrida seems to justify his assertion in terms of communication, as if to discuss things we had to undergo a certain process of translation, which both asserts the existence of a purely idiomatic "private" use of language on the part of each interlocutor, but also denies it at the same time by asserting its translatability. Normally, communication or dialogue is thought of by philosophy as inessential, as accidental, or as reducible to the solitary monologue of the soul's dialogue with *itself* (Plato). Any detour beyond this reflexive loop is both non-essential and risky since it introduces the possibility of misunderstanding and "loss of data", *mis*communication. Philosophy's ideal discourse is a circular return to itself.

But deconstruction begins with a critique of the idea that meaning is fully constituted in the private interior of a meaning-bestowing consciousness, and that its translation into a particular language with the act of speech is always a compromise that falls short of the original intention and, to a greater or lesser extent, sullies it. For Derrida, such a journey beyond one's self-enclosure is essential and necessary, not least because a public and external (not to say material) linguistic system, with all of its constitutively different sounds and words, must be employed during any act of communication.

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Given that we are speaking of language, and languages are, in modern Europe, for the most part divided up according to their nationality (English, French, German…), we must consider the journey beyond one's national borders, through translation and international dialogue, as the principal form in which this detour occurs within philosophy.

Philosophy itself considers the relation between philosophy and nationality to be contingent and extrinsic, and yet secretly philosophy knows that the very idea of nationality is itself a *philosophical* idea, an idea determined by philosophy itself, and so in some way internal to it. The very idea of "nation" is a philosophical concept, a notion belonging within the armoury of political philosophy: as Derrida has it, "the concept and word 'nation' are philosophical, and could not have been constituted, historically, outside a philosophical-type milieu and a discourse marked by a certain history of the philosophical as such".

THE VERY IDEA OF "NATION" IS A PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPT, A NOTION BELONGING WITHIN THE ARMOURY OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

To summarise things as they stand: the traditional, *philosophical* position affirms that nationality would remain outside of philosophy as such, and philosophy would be equally exterior to nationality. The *deconstructive* position, on the other hand, aims to demonstrate that philosophy, unbeknownst to itself or contrary to what for the most part it avows concerning itself, will have overflowed its apparent boundaries; and what it imagines to be altogether outside of itself is actually a mirage, a projection into the exterior of something that is in truth internal to it – a fantasy, indeed, but in the strict psychoanalytic sense of an image that is necessary to our very sense of our own identity, a *constitutive* exclusion of an imaginary outside that makes an individual's identity as a whole possible for the first time, but also strictly impossible since it incorporates the very "other" that it thereby excludes.

This means that something of the empirical, the contingent and the particular comes to contaminate the transcendental, the necessity and universality of philosophy; but also that something of the philosophical comes to contaminate what philosophy itself had previously presented as *non*-philosophical, outside philosophy: nationhood, for instance.

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Often, philosophers describe our recent history as one in which nations and states are declining in terms of their geopolitical importance and their power in the face of transnational corporations and institutions such as NATO, the UN, or the European Union, and those organisations related to it. On the radical left, one frequently speaks of the state ultimately "withering away", or else one imagines such a thing, and given


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the state's intimate intrication with the nation, this can make way either for the unbridled sovereignty of international Capital, or for a new and international solidarity of those disadvantaged by the system as it stands. On the right, one tends simply to worry about the loss of national sovereignty, and the way in which this supposed loss is presented by way of the media tends to encourage a resurgence of nationalistic desire.

It would be illuminating here to consider the British situation in the wake of a somehow (at the time of writing, in September 2019) still-to-be-decided referendum which is taken to justify a single nation's separation from a supra-national entity known as Europe, and the return of right-wing and other nationalisms at a time when the tide of history seemed to some – on both the right and the left – to be turning towards federation and internationalism, "cosmopolitanism", whether of free trade and movement, or of solidarity. Could Derrida endorse such a unidirectional vision of history?

Derrida's position seems to imply that the desire for a return to a national idiom – a certain national*ism* even – might be *eternally* present within philosophy itself, and that would mean among all the nations of Europe, and that even if nations were to some degree superseded, this would not then mean that the *desire* for them would also be destroyed.

The essay of Derrida's from which I draw here derives from seminars given in the late 1980's. At the time, Derrida tells us, there has never been more (international) communication, travel, and exchange, and yet "the effects of opacity, national limits or even nationalistic claims have never been as marked as they are today". Perhaps we could say that this is even truer in 2019: "we" have never been more nationalistic, and never more cosmopolitan. This was one of the few things that the referendum proved. This vote, exceptionally high in its turn-out, implying that both positions actually mattered to the voters, split the electorate in half, or at least into two camps, in the way of a "binary machine", as one might call such devices. The ballot forced us to divide up amongst ourselves into either nationalists (or those in whom the desire for nationhood, immunised and isolated identity, was overriding) and the internationalists (who value international exchange and passage more highly).

From a deconstructive point of view, then, the referendum result could only have been so split, but at the same time it should never have been asked in such rigidly disjunctive terms, for to ask an electorate unambiguously to decide which of the two tendencies is to predominate is to betray the very nature of (national) identity: in fact, both national particularity and cosmopolitan universality are equally essential.

This is not to say that deconstruction will be neutral: it seems that if cosmopolitanism is capable also of incorporating a certain nationalism, and if the same does *not* go for nationalism, *mutatis mutandis*, then deconstruction will simply be on the side of cosmopolitanism, if it is forced to choose. As indeed, in the United Kingdom, it recently was.

This is not simply a question of open borders and the end of a certain national cultural identity, for one has to be careful to distinguish between two possible senses of internationalism: 1) the deconstructive recognition of the incompleteness of identity and its dependence on the "other", and 2) the total dissolution of national identity and idiom. The latter, we would once have said, was most likely to take the form of a globalised Anglo-American language and culture, but today this is becoming more unclear. Since we are not promoting the entire dissolution of national identity, this means that an analogous distinction must be made within nationalism as well: the latter could bespeak a simple isolation(ism) or it could constitute a more moderate reaction to the risk of a full loss of national identity embodied in the trend towards the international according to the second of its valences.

In any case, this duality to be found within each side of the opposition gives us yet more cause to assert that the very terms of the referendum's question were inadequate to what was at stake, and by no means straightforwardly dividing neatly between Left and Right. Hence the ongoing situation we remain in at the time of writing.

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But if deconstruction opposes the philosophy of history which affirms a decline of the nation-state, then does such a position with respect to nationality and the apparently eternal and *a*historical character of

its contradictory tendencies deprive deconstruction of any philosophy of history whatsoever? Does it prevent it from saying anything truly insightful about the particularity of our historical moment?

EACH EPOCH, IF SUCH A THING EXISTS, WOULD BE DEFINED BY THE PARTICULAR NATIONAL PHILOSOPHY THAT IS TEMPORARILY, FOR THE DURATION OF THAT ERA, ELEVATED TO THE LEVEL OF THE UNIVERSAL, THE EMBODIMENT OF PHILOSOPHY AS SUCH

Perhaps there is another sense of history which deconstruction might learn from Alain Badiou: history understood as a sequence that links together Ancient Greece, 19th century Germany, and post-war France. This would be a history in which certain epochs are defined by the ascendancy of a particular national philosophy. Perhaps our brief account of nationality and national philosophy might encourage us to propose such a thing in the name of deconstruction. On this account, each epoch, if such a thing exists, would be defined by the particular national philosophy that is temporarily, for the duration of that era, elevated to the level of the *universal*, the embodiment of Philosophy *as such*. Close to Hegel and Heidegger, but unlike them in refusing to restrict philosophical language to the Greek and the German, as if their primacy were permanent and unquestionable. The result of an election is always temporary. The Greek, German, French, or Italian philosophy which is said to lead the way in each era would capture the very essence of philosophy only by constituting the most forceful and original intervention of which philosophical thought is capable during that period of its history – a contingent empirical part promoted to the position of the transcendental, the keystone of Philosophy itself.

At the very least, the idea of a national philosophy has allowed us to gain some insight into Derrida's philosophy, and this has in turn allowed us to think through some aspects of the recent referendum and the political situation it both expresses and betrays. This in turn has stimulated us to address certain questions to deconstruction in turn, on the topic of its philosophy of history, to probe its limits, and to suggest ways in which thinking might press beyond them, so as to conceptualise our current predicament more comprehensively.

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